

Giants of the Night

A Guide to Missouri's Common Silk Moths

Giant silk moths have huge, velvety wings, bright colors and inviting, furry bodies. About 13 species live in Missouri.

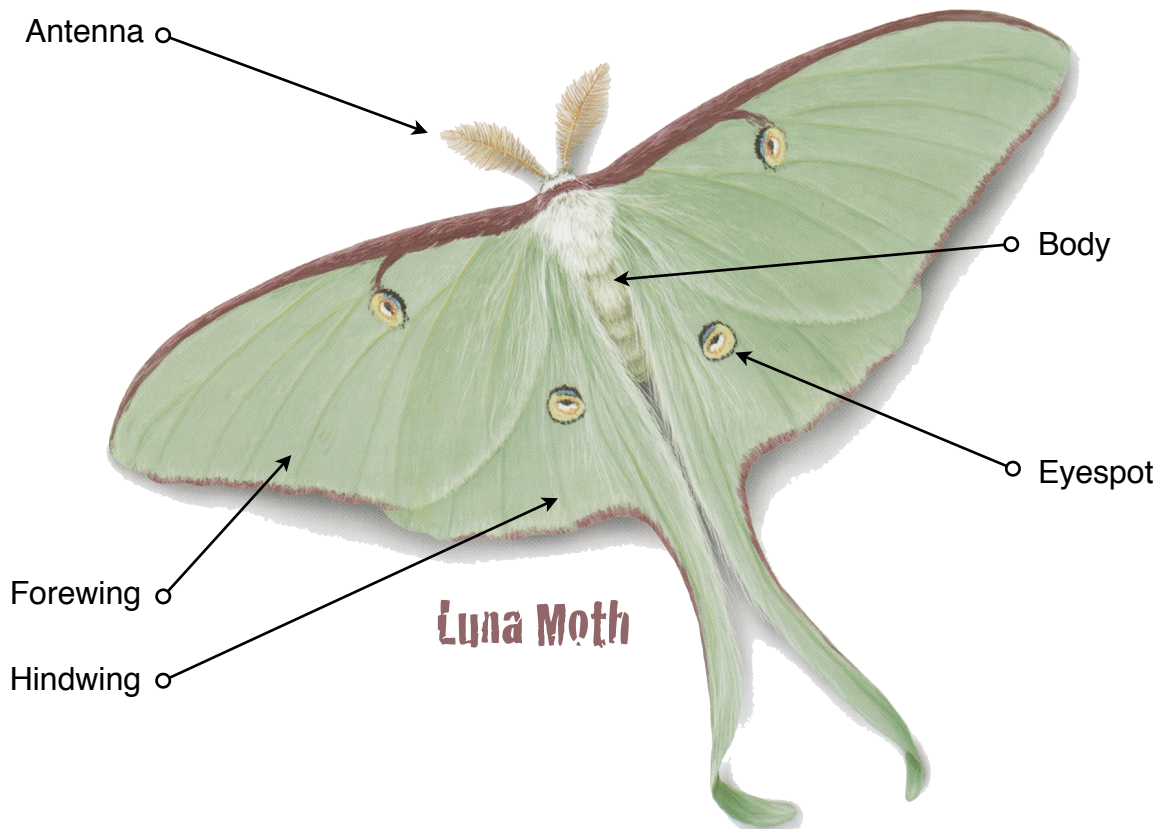
At night, female moths emit scents called pheromones. Males “smell” the pheromones with large, featherlike antennae and flutter to females. After mating, females lay up to 100 eggs, usually on leaves. The adult moths die soon after mating.

About a week later, the eggs hatch into caterpillars. Caterpillars, or larvae, are eating machines. They shed their skin when their bodies grow too big for their exoskeleton. After they molt four to six times, the caterpillars are ready to spin cocoons. Some use strands of silk to pull leaves around themselves. They form their

cocoons nestled inside this protective curtain. Others burrow underground to form cocoons. All stay in cocoons throughout the winter and emerge in late spring as giant, colorful silk moths.

Read on to learn about Missouri's largest moths. This guide is organized into four sections:

- **What** to look for to identify each moth
- **Where** in Missouri and in which habitats each moth is found
- **When** you're most likely to see each moth
- **Why** each moth is cool





Edward L. Mangault, Clemson University, Bugwood.org

Cecropia Moth

What - Red body with white stripes; reddish-brown wings with white crescents

Where - Statewide near willows, plums and other hardwoods

When - Late April through June from 3:00 a.m. to sunrise

Why - With wings that can stretch over six inches, female cecropia moths are bigger than some birds and bats.



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Polyphemus Moth

What - Brownish-yellow wings look like dead leaves when folded; large blue, black and yellow eyespots on the hindwings

Where - Statewide near forests and woods

When - Mid-April through August from 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. and 3:00 a.m. to dawn

Why - Named after a giant from Greek mythology who had a huge eye, this moth uses its large eyespots to scare off predators.



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Imperial Moth

What - Yellow wings with brownish-purple splotches and bands

Where - Common in the Ozarks and eastern Missouri often found near maples and sassafras

When - Early May through August from 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.

Why - Like all silk moths, imperial moths don't eat—they don't have time. They live as adults for several days then die shortly after mating.



Tom Coleman, University of Kentucky, Bugwood.org

Regal Moth

What - Grayish-brown wings streaked with reddish-brown veins and large yellow spots

Where - Healthy mature forests in the eastern half of the state

When - Late May through July from 9:30 p.m. to midnight

Why - Regal moth caterpillars, called hickory horned devils, can grow up to six inches long and have inch-long spikes on their heads.



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Luna Moth

What - Pale green wings each with a yellow eyespot; hindwings end in long tails

Where - Abundant throughout Missouri near wooded areas

When - Early April through August around midnight

Why - Male luna moths can detect a female's pheromones from several miles away.



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Honey Locust Moth

What - Yellowish-gray forewing; rosy pink hindwing

Where - Found throughout Missouri often near honey locusts and Kentucky coffee trees

When - Mid-April through September from dusk until dawn

Why - These moths produce three generations each summer. The first generation is usually brighter than those that follow.



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Io Moth (Female)

What - Males are bright yellow; females are rosy-brown; both have huge bluish-black eyespots on their hindwings

Where - Common in eastern and southern Missouri often found on sassafras

When - Early May through September from dusk to midnight

Why - Io moth caterpillars are covered with spikes that can sting if they penetrate your skin.



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Spiny Oakworm Moth

What - Bright tan with a white dot on each forewing

Where - Common in the Ozarks, but found wherever oak trees occur

When - Late May through August throughout the night

Why - Oakworm caterpillars burrow into the soil to overwinter and turn into adult moths.